

## Writing Questions

## a 'how to...' guide

**①** 'Writing questions' should be read in conjunction with the 'Questionnaires' guideline. 'Writing questions' relates specifically to the different types of question you may wish to use, and provides advice on how to write successful questions for quantitative survey questionnaires.

### Categories of question

- Classification questions. E.g. '*How old are you?*'  
These ask respondents for factual information about themselves and can be used at the analysis stage to look at the results for various sub-groups of interest.
- Behavioural questions. E.g. '*How often do you visit...?*'  
These ask respondents about what they do, where they do it, when they do it and who they do it with (i.e. how they behave).
- Attitude questions. E.g. '*How far do you agree or disagree that...?*'  
These ask respondents for their opinion, belief or how they feel about something.

### Open and closed questions

Open questions allow respondents to reply freely to a question in their own words, e.g. '*what do you think about the new look St. George's Square?*' An open response format can collect extensive and detailed information, but is time consuming to analyse and will require 'coding' (i.e. allocating responses to a particular category). For more information on coding please see the guideline on 'Analysing and Reporting Quantitative Data'.

Closed questions ask the respondent to choose options from a range of pre-coded answers, which may also include an 'other' or 'don't know' option. Analysis of closed questions is much quicker and they are therefore particularly appropriate for large-scale surveys. Closed questions can have a variety of response formats:

### Closed questions can have a variety of response formats:

- Dichotomous (i.e. one of two possible answers)  
For example, are you: EU Citizen  Non EU Citizen
- Multiple choice (make sure you state whether only one or several responses are permitted)
- Response scales. These are commonly used for attitude questions to measure strength of opinion.

### Response scales

The response scales used for questions are usually either verbal, for example:

Please indicate how far you agree or disagree with the proposal to build a new leisure centre at X location:

Strongly agree <input type="checkbox"/>	Agree <input type="checkbox"/>	Neither agree nor disagree <input type="checkbox"/>	Disagree <input type="checkbox"/>	Strongly disagree <input type="checkbox"/>
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or numerical, for example:

On a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 = '*completely dissatisfied*' and 10 = '*completely satisfied*', how satisfied or dissatisfied are you overall with the recycling collection service provided by Kirklees Council?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<input type="checkbox"/>									

Neutral/mid-points on scales are optional, depending on whether you want to 'force' a choice.

Avoiding the 'pitfalls' – ten tips for writing successful questions

**1. KISS - keep it short and simple**

Questions should be as short as possible and use straightforward, everyday language.

*E.g.* Not: '*With what frequency do you purchase broadsheet or tabloid reading material?*'  
 But: '*How often do you buy a newspaper?*'

**2. Avoid jargon**

Try to avoid jargon or technical terms that respondents may not understand.

*E.g.* Not: '*How often is your waste receptacle collected?*'  
 But: '*How often is your bin collected?*'

**3. Avoid double-barrelled questions**

Questions which actually ask two things at once are a common design error. They are difficult to answer and cause problems at the analysis stage as it is unclear which part of the question has been responded to. Different questions need to be treated separately.

*E.g.* Not: '*Do you go shopping in Huddersfield or Dewsbury town centre?*'  
 But: '*Do you go shopping in Huddersfield town centre?*'  
'*Do you go shopping in Dewsbury town centre?*'

**4. Be specific**

Vague words such as 'occasionally' or 'regularly' mean different things to different people so try to be as specific as possible when referring to timescales.

*E.g.* Not: '*Do you use Huddersfield library regularly?*'  
 But: '*Do you use Huddersfield library at least once a month?*'

This can also apply to questions that refer to particular circumstances.

*E.g.* Not: '*When you contact Kirklees Direct....*'  
 But: '*On the last occasion you contacted Kirklees Direct...*'

**5. Avoid the use of double negatives**

Care should be taken when wording questions containing negatives as they can be difficult to interpret.

*E.g.* Not: '*Do you not use non-recycled paper?*'  
 But: '*Do you use recycled paper?*'

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### 6. Avoid the use of leading questions

Direct questions that imply a particular viewpoint, may 'lead' people to respond in a certain way and cause bias.

*E.g. Not: 'Do you agree that there should be more leisure centres in Kirklees?'*

*But: 'What do you think about the number of leisure centres in Kirklees?'*

- There are too many leisure centres
- The current number is about right
- There aren't enough leisure centres

  
  


### 7. State the alternatives

A failure to state the alternatives to a proposal can create leading questions. Collecting information on a range of available options is likely to be more useful and will reduce bias.

*E.g. Not: 'Are you in favour of building a roundabout at X to improve traffic flow?'*

- Yes
- No

*But: 'Which of the following options do you feel would best improve traffic flow at X?'*

- Roundabout
- Traffic lights (peak hours only)
- Traffic lights (full time)
- None of the above

  
  
  


### 8. Create categories for classification questions

Potentially sensitive classification questions (for example about income) may cause problems. It can therefore be helpful to create categories for respondents to choose from rather than asking an open question.

*E.g. Not: 'How much is your annual income?'*

*But: 'Which of the following bands does your annual income fall into?'*

- £10 000 or less
- £10 001 - £15 000
- £15 001 - £20 000
- £20 001 - £25 000
- £25 001 - £30 000
- More than £30 000

  
  
  
  
  


### 9. Ensure that your categories make sense

Be careful not to leave out or overlap any response categories.

- E.g. Not: 18-25*
- 25-35
  - 35-45
  - 45+

- But: 17 and under*
- 18-25
  - 26-35
  - 36-45
  - 46 and over

**10. Use balanced rating scales**

A balance of positive and negative response options is essential to avoid bias.

*E.g.*

Not:

Completely agree  
Strongly agree  
Slightly agree  
Disagree

  
  
  

But:

Completely agree  
Strongly agree  
Slightly agree  
Slightly disagree  
Strongly disagree  
Completely disagree

  
  
  
  
  
**What next?**

If you would like to know more please get in touch:

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